

## SYNTHETIC AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

BY REMBERT G. SMITH

THE idea that authority in religion is to be found in a single source has long prevailed, but it is after all erroneous. While speculatively plausible the attempt to apply it in experience has revealed reasons that require its rejection. There is really no monistic authority in religion which should be respected without any reservations.

Simple explanations have a presumption in their favour only with those who fail to see how vast and varied life is. Unscientific satisfaction with simplicity many times sustains superficiality and stagnation. The doctor who could cure only the measles but claimed that he could change all other maladies into measles is but a legendary quack in the field of medical science and practice, but his twin brother has had a large and baneful influence in theology and philosophy, an influence which happily is now waning rapidly.

True authority in religion is synthetic rather than simple, multiple rather than monistic. The government established and guided by it has a constitution providing checks and balances rather than a rule of centralized and absolute power.

### THE FAILURE OF MONISTIC AUTHORITY IN RELIGION

The claim that real authority in religion is to be found in one source must be disallowed because of the testimony of history as to its inadequacy and iniquity. The theory apparently sound has had centuries in which to show its real character and it has been conclusively proven to be erroneous.

The Church is not infallible in matters either of faith or conduct. Down the centuries decrees and deliverances have come from councils and popes. In them there are inconsistencies and contradictions which make incredible the assertion that the Church should have exclusive authority in religion. A foolish consistency may be, as Emerson says, the hobgoblin of little minds but rational and moral

consistency in individuals and institutions is absolutely necessary for the maintenance of influence over an intelligent and moral constituency. The resistance of science by the Church through its stupid mis-interpretations of the Scriptures and its palpable progressive retreat from strongholds of dogma no longer tenable have demonstrated its fallibility so that no one who reads without bias the history can believe any longer in the absoluteness of ecclesiastical authority. This difficulty becomes quite insuperable when the record of the Church as to repression and persecution is considered. The alignment of the Church with the powerful even when they were cruel to the weak and the poor, the persecution and the burning of heretics and of witches by the millions, the subordination of the State made possible by the superstitions of rulers—these and other similar facts have stripped the Church of the absolute authority in the practical life of the world which it proudly claimed and exercised for so many centuries. This power it will never again. Bismarck spoke for modern times when he said. "I will not go to Canossa either in the flesh or in the spirit!" As to this, history will not repeat itself.

The Protestant reformers denied that the Church has final authority as to religious truth and declared that such authority was in the Holy Scriptures which they considered to have as the result of inspiration an inerrancy which the evidence had demonstrated not to inhere in the Church as she has spoken either through councils or popes.

The claim that the Holy Scriptures are inerrant has not been maintained by its proponents and protagonists and has really been abandoned and the effort has been made to sustain the substitute theory that the Scriptures as originally written under inspiration were inerrant and that the errors have come about through the mishaps of the ages.

This argument is inconclusive. If man needs an inerrant revelation of religious truth through literature alone, the God who provided such a revelation would be bound to protect it even from infinitesimal impairments threatened by the shocks of change. Why favor one generation with a perfect manuscript which does not remain perfect? Is religious revelation but one flash of lighting in the darkness of human ignorance followed by the reasserted power of that darkness?

The Holy Scriptures do not contain scientific truth. The men who wrote them were in ignorance as to the material world and their inspiration did not emancipate them from these errors. After centuries of protest by mistaken defenders of the scriptures this is now admitted in all areas where the facts have had a patient hearing before minds really open to consideration of the accumulating evidence gathered by modern investigators.

The Holy Scriptures alone do not constitute a source of inerrant truth in morals or religion. The writers of it assembled in one parliament resemble too much the delegates who met in the council of Babel. They hopelessly disagree about matters of central importance, both in morals and religion, and they severally advocate antinomies abhorrent to the minds of man which holds with tenacity to the axiom that truth though many sided really constitutes a harmonious whole.

The Old Testament has a controversy with the New Testament, and Moses' "lex talionis" is repealed by Jesus who called him back to Hermon partly no doubt to tell him of his mistakes. There are irreconcilable moral dissimilarities between Joshua the conqueror of Canaan and John the Evangelist of Ephesus. Abraham with his harem and Paul with his impossible and irreligious ascetic doctrine of marriage are hopelessly disagreed as to the sex problem. If Jesus had invited him to the feast of Cana at Galilee, he would have gone with reluctance, and his spirit of resistance against the gladness of the occasion might have soured the wine. Paul's assertion that propagation is to be avoided if it is possible for the individual to resist the power of appetite is partly responsible for the arid asceticisms and preposterous puritanisms which have plagued human society.

Certain doctrines as to the nature of God which have been drawn from the Scriptures considered as the sole source of religious truth are at variance with each other which is utterly hopeless of reconciliation. That God is a deity partisan in his affections and activities in favor of the Israelites cannot be true if He is the just God of all the nations. Nor can the conception of God set forth by John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards which they ably supported by irrefragable proof texts be true if the conception of Him expounded by James Arminius and John Wesley established by equally convincing proof texts be correct. It is impossible to

believe in arbitrary predestination and in the love of God for all men, and it is equally impossible to show that either of these conceptions has no foundation in the Scriptures. It is said that a great preacher admitted that he preached impartially the doctrines of predestination and of the possibility of salvation for every man. About the same time according to rumour a teacher told the trustees of a remote rural school when they asked him whether he taught that the earth was flat or round that it was entirely agreeable to him to teach it either way. The influence of this type of preacher or teacher becomes more and more impossible in the modern world which requires leaders who will not surrender to the tyrannies of scholastic theories as to the nature of the Scriptures or to the abject ignorance of the blamelessly unenlightened.

The demonstration of the insufficiency of either the Church or the Scriptures as a monistic source of authority in religion has resulted recently in a search for some other source and religious experience has been declared to be all that is to be desired to meet the need. However, the difficulty growing out of the varieties of this experience presents itself, and cannot be removed though there are certain uniformities of real value.

Religious experience as it is found today has been determined by influences flowing from the Holy Scriptures and the Church. John Wesley's heart was strangely warmed but it was in the Aldersgate Street Chapel while the leader was explaining a Pauline Epistle and it was at the end of a search for the blessing which began in the Epworth Rectory, continued in Oxford University, in the conversations with the Moravians, in searchings of the Scriptures and the teachings of the Church. The pearl of great price was found by Wesley in soil semi-scriptural and semi-ecclesiastical and he was ever ready to give the reasons for the rapturous faith which sent him out to his romantic and resistless evangelism.

Experience considered by itself cannot be the source of authority in religion. It is derivative and not original as it is found today. It is true that the religious experience of individuals preceded and produced both the Scriptures and the Church. Moses is at the burning bush before he stands on the burning summit of Sinai to receive the laws on the tables of stone. Peter confesses his faith before he becomes the rock on which Christ can build his Church.

Paul sees the heavenly vision of Christ before he is empowered for his apostolic adventures and achievements.

From the experience of these and other men the Scriptures and the Church came as also similar experiences in other men when they touched and taught the Joshuas and Timothies who were to carry on the work of their spiritual fathers. Those who insist today that because religious experience in individuals antedated the Church and the Scriptures that it is now to be relied on as sole authority in religion, ignore the method of progress in revelation and are really reactionary. Nor is there any real relief in turning away from a Church not infallible and Scriptures not inerrant to the religious experience from which the Church and the Scriptures flowed as streams from a spring. Why depend altogether upon experience as authority in religion if its past creatures—the Church and the Scriptures are not either one perfectly authoritative?

What we know as religious experience now coming, as it does, partly from the Church and the Scriptures differs in function from the experience which created the Ecclesia and the Sacred Letters. Religious experience in this dispensation is the fruit on the tree the root of which was the experience of the holy men of old. Religious experience in Paul of Tarsus and in John Wesley are alike in bringing peace to their hearts. They are unlike in that Paul was fitted by it to write the hymn on love and John Wesley to write various valuable religious literature distinctly inferior to the Pauline letters. The religious experience which produced the Scriptures and the Church will never be reproduced. It is no longer needed. It has done its work and this work abides. God buries his workmen who have builded the habitations which He had for them to build—and carries on His work through workmen who build something new and needed.

#### SYNTHETIC AUTHORITY AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR MONISTIC

The demonstrated insufficiency of monistic authority in this age of search and criticism has brought perplexity to many and despair to some. The conviction that peace is possible only if authority in religion can be found in one source has been so long tacitly accepted that the increasing difficulty to sustain the sufficiency of any such one source has caused real distress to many sincere souls. Their petulant protests against progressive prophetism have filled



the air but though really pathetic they have not availed against the resolute leadership which realizes the emergent need for rational reconstruction in religion. Not to meet this need can but result in wide-spread damage and there is no time for laggard lingering on the part of religious leaders.

The Bishop of Ripon recently suggested that science take a ten year holiday so that the new knowledge might be assimilated. No doubt he was really voicing an indirect exhortation to religious thinkers to quicken their pace so that they might walk *pari passu* with the scientists who certainly will not stop or slow down. One of the most hopeful signs of the present is the fact that many religious thinkers are realizing their responsibility and are consecrating themselves to the manifest duty of the hour.

#### THE FOUR SOURCES OF AUTHORITY

Synthetic authority in religion is to be found in the Holy Scriptures, the Church, the Ethico-religious consciousness of Man, and in Science. The area protected by these four fortresses will be found to be ample enough and safe enough.

The Holy Scriptures while not inerrant have authority in religion. There is error in the view that authority is to be found only in that which is perfect and that the vindication of Scriptural authority requires a theory of inspiration postulating an inerrant revelation. That there ever was a perfect Bible is but a fiction which is a product of the arbitrary a-priorism which seeks to impose the tyranny of the theoretical upon the territory of the actual. The perfect is not found in the area of human attainment; it is to be found in the ultimate achievement of man made possible by the help of God. It is not in the perspective of the past but in the horizon of the future. It is true that God has helped hitherto but it has not pleased Him to make the past generations perfect without the present and the future.

The human element in the Scriptures imparts imperfection to it. Nevertheless there come from the Holy Scriptures certain necessary religious elements, and these have rightful and beneficial authority. It is an authority more of the life than of the letter, of pervading principles rather than of particular precepts. The duties which it enjoins and the grace which it reveals are to be understood only when it is read and meditated upon as a whole. Its warnings

are heard as we read the record of lives stormy in sinnings, and its wooings to righteousness are well nigh irresistible as we see the moral beauties of its heroes and heroines. By it we are led to the foot of Sinai that we may fear and tremble because of our sins: by it we are led to the foot of Calvary where we find pardon and peace in the assurance of God's mercy. In the completed revelation in the Holy Scriptures we find knowledge of God's law gradually disclosed until the proclamation of it in its perfection comes from the lips of Christ as he commands the love of God and man.

The Holy Scriptures are the sources of values for man as a moral and religious being just as material nature is the source of supplies for his physical needs. From neither do these values flow as water from a free fountain. Rather must they be gained by study and by toil. Just as man fells the forests and farms the fields so that he may have fuel and food for his material needs, so also must he study with all his powers of mind in order that he may gain from the Holy Scriptures sustenance for his soul. They are not surface mines of precious metals.

"Truth is no idle ore,  
But iron dug from central gloom,  
And heated hot in burning fears,  
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,  
And battered by the shocks of doom,  
To shape and use."

It is just as irrelevant to say that the Holy Scriptures are inerrant as it would be to say that nature is inerrant. Both of them are realities so vast as to be inadequately described by the terms which are used in mathematics or logic or law. The attempt should not be made to compress them into such constricted categories. They are too great to be confined by the philosophical and theological conceptions which have been elaborated concerning them. They are sure to come back to life from the tomb to which they have been sent by the persecuting powers of pedantry and loosened from the grave clothes of a presumptuous scholasticism, to walk abroad again in the power of a life which cannot be holden by any grave. The leaves of this book are for the healing of the nations and they shall not wither. Neither their foes nor their mistaken defenders equally as threatening to them shall be successful in discrediting the Holy Scriptures.

For several decades, too much importance has been attached to questions of origin which cannot be dogmatically answered. It is impossible to find out what the process was by which the Scriptures came into being, nor is it necessary to have certain knowledge as to these matters. Many of the imaginative theories as to the inspiration of the Scriptures have done harm because of the error of thinking that the value of the Scriptures was to a large degree dependent upon the stability of these theories. The shaking and fall of the theories are supposed by many to bring down into ruins the Scriptures themselves, so insidiously have some theologians increased the popular estimate of the importance of their speculations. As a matter of fact, theories of origin, scientific or theological are of secondary importance. It is possible to find out what man and nature and religion are now and to appropriate the values that are in reach of living hands instead of expending our energies in researches to find out what happened in a past which must forever be at least partly hidden from those who live in the present and will live in the future. To realize the danger of the backward look does not indicate that the past has been like Sodom. It is just as destructive of peace to be convinced that theories must be constructed as to what occurred yesterday as it is to be consumed with anxiety as to what may happen tomorrow. The fact that there is no adequate conception as to the origin of the Scriptures does not impair their value, which exists in their abiding qualities—qualities which will forever commend them to men as they seek satisfaction for their undying needs.

The Holy Scriptures have authority based not upon any belief as to their origin but upon the power which they directly exert upon men. In spite of the fact that they contain varying and conflicting doctrines, the total result of the study of them has been the disengaging of ideas and ideals which have had and will have incalculable value. Especially is this true as to moral laws. The composite and self-corrected deliverance of the Scriptures as to duty is the loftiest known to human experience and is the source also of the ethical energizing by which man is made able to ascend to these altitudes. Such authority has not been impaired by criticism. Geological theories as to the time and method of the forming of the coal measures do not prevent coal giving out heat nor gasoline from pulling automobiles and airplanes. The inherent moral power of



the Scriptures is not reduced by the theories or the demonstrated conclusions of scholarship, though many alarmed defenders of the faith have been in a panic of fear that there would be such a result.

The Holy Scriptures are authoritative because in them we learn of Jesus Christ—of His birth, life, teachings, deeds, death and resurrection. Such a character as was His could not have been imagined so that the description of it is the demonstration of its historical reality. There are those who would find all authority in the person of Jesus Christ as considered independent of the record concerning Him. They claim that they can worship Him though they are not sure as to what He said or did, and that they can adore Him though agnostic as to His attributes. This is a striking illustration of the surrender of the rights of the intellect in religion, of mysticism raised to the nth power. Such worship is really impossible unless man kills his reason and common sense. We know His character only as we contemplate His characteristics. We know the person of Jesus only as we know His words and deeds. It is not possible by an intuition which ignores particulars to see universals. Those who insist that there is monistic authority in religion in Jesus Christ but who admit fluctuating uncertainty as to what He did and said are seeking to build a home on the shifting sands of a specious scepticism. It may well be asserted that Jesus Christ possesses final authority in religion, but what does this avail unless there is faith as to what He said and did? There is no value in empty symbolic words even if they are the names Jesus Christ. His person was revealed through His words and acts and was portrayed in the New Testament record of them. We do not know about Him unless the record is true, for the traditions as they supplement this record are of little consequence. Mystical fellowship with Him is indeed a blessed experience of believers, but it cannot exist if there be no faith in the historic Christ, and that faith rests on the substantial factual reliability of the New Testament record, though not on its absolute inerrancy.

The record as to his sayings and doings is not complete, but it is sufficient to be the source of a correct conception of Him, and the clarity and cogency of this conception are fruits that grow on the Holy Scriptures which we search because they treat of Him. Those who believe with Tennyson that "Christ no after age shall e'er out-grow" must also believe that the Scriptures will also abide. The

expectation, the emergence, and the explanation of His incarnation as experiences of the holy men of old produced the Holy Scriptures, and they will be forever the source of a necessary element of authority in religion.

The Church also has real though relative authority, conferred upon her in the command of Christ as He sends her out to proclaim His law and His love and to minister to men. This authority is maintained by the obedience of the Church to Christ's commission and her conformity to His spirit. "The things that I do ye shall do and greater things than these shall ye do"—said Christ to his Church, and when engaged in these dynamic deeds the Church has a manifest and mighty authority to which men gladly yield because of the blessings brought them. The credentials of Christly consecration and the sacrificial signs of the stigmata establish the true authority of the Church. Paul on the way to Macedonia, Francis of Assisi "the minstrel of God," John Wesley preaching to the Cornish miners in spite of their stoning of him, David Livingstone and Mary Slessor of Calabar, William Booth and Florence Nightingale, these are leaders of the Church against whom there is no insurgency. The isles wait for the laws which they announce, the broken hearted and the sick and the sinful are willing subjects of their saving sovereignty.

The Church has a really maternal authority as she gives herself to loving ministries to men. It is said that when Newman went to the Roman Catholic Church that he laid his head on her bosom and gave up his painful effort to solve the problems by his own thinking, agreeing to accept the solutions of the Church. To stop thinking is really an evasion of responsibility on the part of individual or institution. Nevertheless, the prime duty or obligation of the Church is to love men and to minister to them rather than to answer all the questions they may ask. In doing this she will share the magnetism of her Lord who said, "I, if I be lifted, will draw all men unto me!" Important as is the mission of the Church to teach men, it is not as important as her duty to love them. The solution of problems is not as imperative as the salving of wounds. The authority of the Church as it is established in her sacrificial pastoral ministries is unshakable. Its constitutional origin is the commission of Christ, its abiding power is fellowship with Him,

its abundant fruitage is the increasing blessings borne to men. The Church may have irenic if not intellectual infallibility.

To bless humanity by the establishing of faith and the enlarging of hope is an important duty of the Church. It is an obligation even higher to bless men by the incessant incarnating of the love which became gloriously visible in the declarations, in the deeds, and in the death of Christ. As the Church does this she has her highest authority. Her most effectual equipment is not a Platonic brow but a Christly heart. The outgoings of her irresistible power are through the work she does as Christ strengthens her.—As to the present perplexity Lanier well writes:

“Vainly might Plato’s brain revolve it,  
Plainly the heart of a child could solve it.”

This heart is that of the Holy Child of Bethlehem the tenderness of whose transcendent compassions should be traditions living in the heart and deeds of His Church. Here is the true *Elan vital* of the Ecclesia.

The Church has authority relative to the Scriptures. It was created before they were written, formed the canon by the selection of that which was best fitted to survive and to serve the needs of men, continually interprets and reinterprets the sacred letters. John Robinson said, “Let us continually expect new light to break forth from God’s word.” As a matter of fact this light increases as the result of the industrious and intensive study of the Scriptures by the Church. Spiritual light does not break forth from the Scriptures any more than useful electric illumination does from thunder clouds. Benjamin Franklin and Edison must dream and invent before electricity lights the cities of men. The Scriptures contain great resources of moral power but the Church through its work and wisdom must make these vast energies available by her spiritual hydro-electric engineering so that human hearts and homes are warmed and lighted.

The Church has authority achieved through the experiences of her long history. She has been disciplined in the school of trial and error. This authority is of course decreased when she insists on an institutional infallibility which history demonstrates not to have existed. But when all allowances are made for the errors of the Church, it will remain clear that she has gained a cumulative authority as, “knowledge comes but wisdom lingers,” while she

makes her pilgrimage through the chastening centuries. The carnal weapons of intolerance and inquisition are rusting in archaic armories and will never again be drawn from the scabbards of melancholy memories in which they rest. The proverb of pessimism which asserts that history repeats itself is not true.

#### THE AUTHORITY OF MAN'S MORAL NATURE

The moral nature of man also has a degree of authority in religion. Aristotle said man is the measure of all things and Jesus declared the law was made for man and not man for the law. Before there were institutions or literatures there was man. The Church and the Holy Scriptures are, it is true, partly divine in origin and in maintenance, but any elements in them which do violence to the Ethico-religious consciousness of man are additions made by ignorance or selfishness. How many crimes have been committed by those who have claimed to speak for God; how many superstitions have been spread by spurious religious leaders who have terrorized their weaker fellow man; how many erroneous and evil doctrines have been expounded and enforced because men have been taught to distrust the light that was in them. That light, it is true, is insufficient, but it is nevertheless real and it has rightful and rational authority to reject and to disbelieve such doctrines as are repugnant to its principles. The doctrine of humility that teaches that man must be reduced to zero before he can be saved is erroneous. The view that sin has marred the nature of man so that there is no authority left in it is an exaggeration. It is true that there are mysteries which may well be accepted in faith, but when these so called mysteries have in them elements against which the moral-religious consciousness of man protests they are malign and are to be rejected though they may be taught in so called sacred literature and proclaimed by pseudo priests and false prophets. No towering institutionalism—ecclesiastical or political—must be given the tyrannical power to enforce such conceptions.

Ian Maclaren tells in one of his stories how the old Scotch preacher walked the floor in agony all night because the arbitrary predestination taught in some parts of the Scriptures was repugnant to his sense of justice. Nevertheless because of his conviction that he should crush the best elements in his moral nature in order to be a humble recipient of the teaching of an objective revelation he

grimly climbed the pulpit stairs the next Lord's Day and preached the damnation of infants. When John Calvin put Servetus to death in Geneva, he was not really as cruel as he was in requiring believers in his theological system to murder what was best in their own souls. What he required them to do he had first ruthlessly done in his own heart.

Man's moral nature, his Ethico-religious consciousness, has authority in religion. Man has the right and the duty to subject to its testings the teachings of literatures or institutions and peremptorily to reject conceptions which are contrary to the congenital criteria which are clear in the heavens of his moral nature. When he does this, he is true to the divine that is within him against the gainsayings of science or religion falsely so called.

#### THE AUTHORITY OF SCIENCE IN RELIGION

The duty to learn everything possible about the world is religious. The scientist who undertakes it may be expected therefore to make a real contribution to religion. The physicist who works conscientiously in the laboratory is as religious as the priest who prays importunately in the oratory. Kepler the astronomer, who as he studies the stars, cries out, "O God, I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee!" has fellowship with the psalmist as he sings, "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth His handiwork." The truth that the scientist discerns is authoritative in religion, for truth is authoritative everywhere.

Much of scientific truth has pertinence in religion. When we find out how God works we are adding to our religious values and learning how we may more efficiently cooperate with Him. Francis Asbury crossed the Alleghenies sixty times on horse back. It would be irreligious for a bishop to travel that way now. He had better use the railroad, the automobiles, or the air-plane—all creations of modern science and "servants of the servants of God." The use of all the forces of nature for the welfare of man is religious, and it must therefore be religious to find out how best to use them. Science sends its sons out on this quest and it becomes in their cumulative knowledge a conquest of disease, of burdensome labor, of ignorance.

Science has served religion in ridding it of many of the parasites that have weakened it. Faith has many times degenerated into fanaticism and devotion has been shadowed by superstition. The



resistance of these tendencies which will be exerted by true religion may very well be augmented in power by the aid which science brings. The alliance of religion and science rather their antagonism is the need of the times. In such an alliance science will become religious and religion scientific.

The scientific method has manifest authority in religion. To find out as clearly as possible what the facts are and to make the rational conclusion from them is religious as well as scientific. Reverence for God's methods of activity is an integral part of reverence for God Himself. The botanist may stand with as sincere reverence before a growing bush as did Moses before a burning bush.

“Let knowledge grow from more to more  
But more of reverence in us dwell,  
That mind and Soul according well  
May make one music as before,  
But vaster.”

#### THE APPLICATION OF SYNTHETIC AUTHORITY

It is not only possible to apply the tests of synthetic authority in religion today, but there is a pressing need to do so. Unless it is applied, there will be increasing confusion that will culminate in chaos. Multitudes have rebelled openly or secretly against the inadequacy or the tyranny of the types of monistic authority which have been tried. They will not yield to the sole guidance of the Bible, of the Church, of the Moral Nature, or of Science, because they are convinced that neither one of these four sources is alone equal in wisdom or in strength to their needs. It is possible to convince them that the cooperative guidance of all four will mean safety. The traveler fears to climb the Alpine peak roped to one guide only, but if he is securely tied to four stout and skillful guides he attempts without fear the ascent to the summit. There is real and manifest need today for synthetic authority in religion.